



CALIFORNIA Child Abduction TASK FORCE

Reunification Tips for Law Enforcement

The impact of child abductions on children and their families cannot be underestimated or minimized. The ramifications of ineffective and unplanned reunifications are often severe and long-lasting. Therefore, it's imperative that law enforcement and other service providers familiarize themselves with the reactions and consequences of this form of child abuse and victimization. This knowledge can only improve the effective and timely location, recovery, and reunification of abducted children with their legal guardians.

Consider the Following Suggestions to Facilitate the Successful Recovery and Reunification of Abducted Children:

1. Have all necessary legal documents.
2. Establish and implement a community-based, multidisciplinary team approach and plan for responding to recoveries and reunifications of abducted children.
3. Obtain training on effective recovery and reunification methods for all team members and necessary staff. The utilization of experts as trainers is essential.
4. The recovering parent may also be served with legal documents, thereby creating a jurisdictional issue which may result in lengthy and costly litigation.
5. Bring a notarized, written consent from the parent authorizing the child to receive medical treatment if necessary.
6. If the recovering parent is not present and it's believed the child might remember this parent, take a video or audio tape of the child interacting with that parent so law enforcement can better facilitate the recovery. This may help reduce the child's fear. Past photographs of the child with the searching parent along with several of the child's favorite toys might also help calm the child.
7. If this is a "long-distance" recovery, consider calling the left-behind parent so the child can talk to that parent. Tell the child what is happening.
8. When feasible, recoveries and reunifications should not occur in the presence of the abductor or the accomplice.
9. If the recovery takes place at school, the officer should consider having a neutral person present, such as the child's teacher or principal. If the child is old enough, give the child the option of having a support person. This may lessen the trauma to the child.
10. The recovering parent and family should never be given the actual location of the child prior to recovery. Families are emotionally impacted when their children are missing; when parents inappropriately act on lead information, they place their families and others in danger.
11. Always ensure the child's physical safety.
12. Have a mental health professional trained in reunification techniques available for on-call consultation. This individual should be available to meet with the child and explain what has happened and what will happen next. This person should help to prepare the child for the reunion and diffuse some of the child's fear and confusion.
13. Take the child to a safe place where s/he will be reunited with the recovering parent. These reunions should take place in a private, comfortable setting as opposed to an interrogation room, busy office, or lobby.

14. If necessary, contact social services for temporary shelter care until the parent with verified custody or the law enforcement investigator from the originating jurisdiction arrives. Temporary shelter placement should be used only in emergencies. The fewer transitions the child experiences after the recovery, the better.
15. Recovered children may act withdrawn, hostile, or out of control. Be sensitive to the fact that they're probably scared and reacting in the only way they know how. However, establish reasonable boundaries.
16. It's important to help the child regain a sense of control over his/her life. Whenever possible, give the child the ability to make a choice (i.e. "Would you like to sit in this chair or that chair?" – or– "Would you like something to drink? Juice or water?").
17. The recovering parent should plan to be reunited with the child away from other family members and well-wishers. This could be a frightening time so caution needs to be exercised to not overwhelm the child with many people.
18. The media should not be invited to the recovery or the reunification. Should they appear on the scene, establish clear boundaries and be prepared to handle the situation. The media's direct involvement at this time could frighten the child. This is a very personal moment for the reunited family and their privacy should be respected.
19. Provide parents with a copy of "Helpful Suggestions for Parents Recovering Their Abducted Children." Discuss these suggestions with the parent(s)...
20. Prior to the reunion, have the appropriate team member trained in reunification techniques available to meet with the parent. Explain to the parent the details of the child's recovery, the child's living conditions, and what the child was told about them, the left-behind parent.
21. The trained mental health professional should facilitate the reunification between the parent and child. The reunification process should not be rushed. The manner in which this is handled will have a short- and long-term impact on the mental health of both the child and parent.
22. Law enforcement should consider the most appropriate manner for debriefing and/or interviewing the child without causing additional trauma to the child. Explain the situation honestly and compassionately to the child.
23. Negative comments or judgments about the abductor and/or accomplice(s) should not be made to, or in the presence of, the child.
24. Law enforcement investigators from the originating jurisdiction will need to assist the reunited family with referrals to other credible community agencies in their area.
25. Law enforcement from the originating jurisdiction should follow-up with the family within 72 hours of their homecoming. The officer should determine the child's progress and obtain any additional information the child may have to share that could enhance the criminal case.
26. The multi-disciplinary team should debrief and carefully assess its performance in the recovery/reunification process. Improvements to their plan should be ongoing.
27. Keep the parent informed of the progress of any criminal proceedings, release, or outcome.
28. Often disclosures may be made long after the recovery. Without soliciting information, the custodial parent should document statements made by the child.
29. Remember your approach and skill in this area can make a difference in a child's life. Be prepared so the difference you make is a positive one.

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